

UNITED GRAND LODGE OF ENGLAND

YOUR QUESTIONS ANSWERED

Freemasonry under the United Grand Lodge of England is the UK's largest, secular fraternal and charitable organisation.

It has over 300,000 members working in nearly 8,000 lodges throughout England and Wales and 30, 000 more members overseas

This paper provides some basic information about Freemasonry, in the form of Questions & Answers.

Re-produced by and for the use of Brethren in :

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(with acknowledgements)

1. WHAT IS FREEMASONRY?

Freemasonry is the UK's largest secular, fraternal and charitable organisation. It teaches moral lessons and self-knowledge through participation in a progression of allegorical two-part plays.

2. WHY ARE YOU A SECRET SOCIETY?

We are not, but lodge meetings, like those of many other groups, are private and open only to members. The rules and aims of Freemasonry are available to the public. Meeting places are known and in many areas are used by the local community for activities other than Freemasonry. Members are encouraged to speak openly about Freemasonry.

3. WHAT ARE THE SECRETS OF FREEMASONRY?

The secrets of Freemasonry are the traditional modes of recognition which are not used indiscriminately, but solely as a test of membership, e.g. when visiting a lodge where you are not known.

4. WHAT HAPPENS AT A LODGE MEETING?

The meeting is in two parts. As in any association there is a certain amount of administrative procedure - the minutes of the last meeting, proposing and balloting for new members, discussing and voting on financial matters, election of officers, news and correspondence. Then there are the ceremonies for admitting new Masons and the annual Installation of the new Master and appointment of officers. The three ceremonies for admitting a new Mason are in two parts - a slight dramatic instruction in the principles and lessons taught in the Craft followed by a lecture in which the candidate's various duties are spelled out.

5. ISN'T RITUAL OUT OF PLACE IN MODERN SOCIETY?

No. The ritual is a shared experience which binds the members together. Its use of drama, allegory and symbolism impresses the principles and teachings more firmly in the mind of each candidate than if they were simply passed on to him in matter-of-fact modern language.

6. WHY DO GROWN MEN RUN AROUND WITH THEIR TROUSERS ROLLED UP?

It is true that candidates have to roll up their trouser legs during the three ceremonies when they are being admitted to membership. Taken out of context, this can seem amusing, but like many other aspects of Freemasonry, it has a symbolic meaning.

7. WHY DO FREEMASONS TAKE OATHS?

New members make solemn promises concerning their conduct in lodge and in society. Each member also promises to keep confidential the traditional methods of proving that he is a Freemason which he would use when visiting a lodge where he is

not known. Freemasons do not swear allegiances to each other or to Freemasonry. Freemasons promise to support others in times of need, but only if that support does not conflict with their duties to God, the law, their family or with their responsibilities as a Citizen.

8. WHY DO YOUR 'OBLIGATIONS' CONTAIN HIDEOUS PENALTIES?

They no longer do. When Masonic ritual was developing in the late 1600s and 1700s it was quite common for legal and civil oaths to include physical penalties and Freemasonry simply followed the practice of the times. In Freemasonry, however, the physical penalties were always symbolic and were never carried out. After long discussion, they were removed from the promises in 1986.

9. ARE FREEMASONS EXPECTED TO PREFER FELLOW MASONS AT THE EXPENSE OF OTHERS IN GIVING JOBS, PROMOTIONS, CONTRACTS AND THE LIKE?

Absolutely not! That would be a misuse of membership and subject to Masonic discipline. On his entry into Freemasonry each candidate states unequivocally that he expects no material gain from his membership. At various stages during the three ceremonies of his admission and when he is presented with a certificate from Grand Lodge that the admission ceremonies have been completed, he is forcefully reminded that attempts to gain preferment or material gain for himself or others is a misuse of membership which will not be tolerated. The *Book of Constitutions*, which every candidate receives, contains strict rules governing abuse of membership which can result in penalties varying from temporary suspension to expulsion.

10. ISN'T IT TRUE THAT FREEMASONS ONLY LOOK AFTER EACH OTHER?

No. From its earliest days, Freemasonry has been involved in charitable activities. Since its inception, Freemasonry has provided support not only for widows and orphans of Freemasons but also for many others within the community. Whilst some Masonic charities cater specifically but not exclusively for Masons or their dependents, other make significant grants to non-Masonic organisations. On a local level, lodges give substantial support to local causes.

11. AREN'T YOU A RELIGION OR A RIVAL TO RELIGION?

Emphatically not. Freemasonry requires a belief in God and its principles are common to many of the world's great religions. Freemasonry does not try to replace religion or substitute for it. Every candidate is exhorted to practise his religion and to regard its holy book as the unerring standard of truth. Freemasonry does not instruct its members in what their religious beliefs should be, nor does it offer sacraments. Freemasonry deals in relations between men; religion deals in man's relationship with his God.

12. WHY DO YOUI CALL IT THE VSL AND NOT THE BIBLE?

To the majority of Freemasons the Volume of the Sacred Law is the Bible. There are

many in Freemasonry, however, who are not Christian and to them the Bible is not their sacred book and they will make their promises on the book which is sacred to their religion. The Bible will always be present in an English Lodge but as the organisation welcomes men of many different faiths, it is called the Volume of the Sacred Law. Thus, when the Volume of the Sacred Law is referred to in ceremonies, to a non-Christian it will be the holy book of his religion and to a Christian it will be the Bible.

13. WHY DO YOU CALL GOD THE GREAT ARCHITECT?

Freemasonry embraces all men who believe in God. Its membership includes Christians, Jews, Hindus, Sikhs, Muslims, Parsees and others. The use of descriptions such as the Great Architect prevents disharmony. The Great Architect is not a specific Masonic god or an attempt to combine all gods in one. Thus, men of differing religions pray together without offence being given to any of them.

14. WHY DON'T SOME CHURCHES LIKE FREEMASONRY?

There are elements within certain churches who misunderstand Freemasonry and confuse secular rituals with religious liturgy.

Although the Methodist Conference and the General Synod of the Anglican Church have occasionally criticised Freemasonry, in both Churches there are many Masons and indeed others who are dismayed that the Churches should attack Freemasonry, an organisation which has always encouraged its members to be active in their own religion.

15. WHY WILL FREEMASONRY NOT ACCEPT ROMAN CATHOLICS AS MEMBERS?

It does. The prime qualification for admission into Freemasonry has always been a belief in God. How that belief is expressed is entirely up to the individual.

Four Grand Masters of English Freemasonry have been Roman Catholics. There are many Roman Catholic Freemasons.

16. ISN'T FREEMASONRY JUST ANOTHER POLITICAL PRESSURE GROUP?

Emphatically not. Whilst individual Freemasons will have their own views on politics and state policy, Freemasonry as a body will never express a view on either. The discussion of politics at Masonic meetings has always been prohibited.

17. ARE THERE NOT MASONIC GROUPS WHO ARE INVOLVED IN POLITICS?

There are groups in other countries who call themselves Freemasons and who involve themselves in political matters. They are not recognised or countenanced by the United Grand Lodge of England and other regular Grand Lodges who follow the basic principles of Freemasonry and ban the discussion of politics and religion at their

meetings.

18. IS FREEMASONRY AN INTERNATIONAL ORDER?

Only in the sense that Freemasonry exists throughout the free world. Each Grand Lodge is sovereign and independent, and whilst following the same basic principles, may have differing ways of passing them on. There is no international governing body for Freemasonry.

19. WHAT IS THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN FREEMASONRY AND GROUPS LIKE THE ORANGE ORDER, ODD FELLOWS AND BUFFALOES?

None. There are numerous fraternal orders and Friendly Societies whose rituals, regalia and organisation are similar in some respects to Freemasonry's. They have no formal or informal connections with Freemasonry.

20. WHY DON'T YOU HAVE WOMEN MEMBERS?

Traditionally, Freemasonry under the United Grand Lodge of England has been restricted to men. The early stonemasons were all male, and when Freemasonry was organising, the position of women in society was different from today. If women wish to join Freemasonry, there are two separate Grand Lodges in England restricted to women only.

21. WHY DO YOU WEAR REGALIA?

Wearing regalia is historical and symbolic and, like a uniform, serves to indicate to members where they rank in the organisation.

22. HOW MANY FREEMASONS ARE THERE?

Under the United Grand Lodge of England, there are 330,000 Freemasons, meeting in 8644 Lodges. There are separate Grand Lodges for Ireland (which covers north and south) and Scotland, with a combined membership of 150,000. Worldwide, there are probably 5 million members.

23. HOW AND WHEN DID FREEMASONRY START?

It is not known. The earliest recorded 'making' of a Freemason in England is that of Elias Ashmole in 1646. Organised Freemasonry began with the founding of the Grand Lodge of England on 24 June 1717, the first Grand Lodge in the world. Ireland followed in 1725 and Scotland in 1736. All the regular Grand Lodges in the world trace themselves back to one or more of the Grand Lodges of the British Isles.

There are two main theories of origin. According to one, the operative stonemasons who built the great cathedrals and castle had lodges in which they discussed trade affairs. They had simple initiation ceremonies and, as there were no City & Guilds certificates, dues cards or trade union membership cards, they adopted secret signs and words to demonstrate that they were trained masons when they moved from site

to site. In the 1660s, these operative lodges began to accept non-operatives as 'gentlemen masons'. Gradually these non-operatives took over the lodges and turned them from operative to 'free and accepted' or 'speculative' lodges.

The other theory is that in the late 1500s and early 1600s, there was a group which was interested in the promotion of religious and political tolerance in an age of great intolerance when differences of opinion on matters of religion and politics were to lead to bloody civil war. In forming Freemasonry, they were trying to make better men and build a better world. As a means of teaching in those days was by allegory and symbolism, they took the idea of building as the central allegory on which to form their system. The main source of allegory was the Bible, the contents of which were known to everyone even if they could not read, and the only building described in detail in the Bible was King Solomon's Temple, which became the basis for the ritual. The old trade guilds provided them with their basic administration of a Master, Warden, Treasurer and Secretary, and the operative mason's tools provided them with a wealth of symbols with which to illustrate the moral teachings of Freemasonry.

24. HOW MANY DEGREES ARE THERE IN FREEMASONRY?

Basic freemasonry consists of three 'Craft' degrees (Entered Apprentice, Fellow Craft and Master Mason) completed by the Royal Arch degree (Chapter). There are many other Masonic degrees and Orders which are called 'additional' because they add to the basis of the Craft and Royal Arch. They are not basic to Freemasonry but add to it by further expounding and illustrating the principles stated in the Craft and Royal Arch. Some of these additional degrees are *numerically* superior to the third degree but this does not affect the fact that they are additional to and not in any way superior to or higher than the Craft. The ranks that these additional degrees carry have no standing with the Craft or Royal Arch.

25. HOW MUCH DOES IT COST TO BE A FREEMASON?

It varies from lodge to lodge but anyone wishing to join can find a lodge to suit his pocket. On entry, there is an initiation fee and an apron to buy. A member pays an annual subscription to his lodge which covers his membership and the administrative cost of running the lodge. It is usual to have a meal after the evening; the cost of this can be included either in the annual subscription or paid for at the time.

It is entirely up to the individual member what he gives to Charity, but it should always be without detriment to his other responsibilities. Similarly, he may join as many lodges as his time and pocket can allow as long as it does not adversely affect his family life and responsibilities.